

1.941  
R5988  
Reserve

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
Bureau of Agricultural Economics

---

RURAL LIFE AND NATIONAL WELFARE

---

By Carl C. Taylor, Head,  
Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare.

Address, American Association of School Administrators,  
St. Louis, Missouri, February 27, 1940.

The importance of rural life in the national welfare is relatively greater than the proportion the farm population is of the national population, because each generation of farm people contributes more than its share of people to the next generation, and because agriculture produces more than its share of the primary necessities of life. Furthermore, farming as a way of life in actual behavior, and even more so in thought and philosophy, is a body of tradition accepted by millions of people who do not live on the farm. Psychologically, we are still a rural nation, although the rural population constitutes less than one-half, and the farm population less than one-fourth, of the total population. Our cities have been built to a very large extent, and are still being constantly replenished from the reservoir of farm population. Something like 20 million persons born and reared on farms are now living in American towns and cities, and I roughly estimate that at least 25 million additional persons now living in towns and cities are the sons and daughters of farm-born and farm-reared parents.

Because we are in the habit of thinking that culture originates in and flows from cities, we are very likely to overlook the fact that there is a constant flow of people moving from farms to urban centers, taking with them habits and attitudes, customs, traditions, and a culture which are essentially rural. I am keeping this fact definitely in mind as I discuss Rural Life and National Welfare.

Youth constituted a considerably larger percentage of the farm than of the total national population. Of the 31,800,907 people living on farms on January first, 1935, 55.5 percent was under 25 years of age and 36.1 percent was under 15 years of age. In the national population only 36.6 percent was under 25 years of age and 27.3 percent was under 15 years of age. In other words, whereas a little less than one-fourth (24.5 percent) of all American people lived on farms, considerably more than one-fourth (28.6 percent) of all American youth lived on farms. The farm population contained only 21 percent of the women of child-

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
LIBRARY

6480

81.1



bearing age of the Nation (aged 15 to 44); but 29.2 percent of the children under 5 years of age are on farms. Each year farm families contribute by way of net migration something like 471,000 people to towns and cities, 75 percent of whom are young people just entering upon life's occupations.

In considering the proportion of our total citizenry which makes up our rural population, we must add to the 32 million farm population another 24 million (23,662,710) rural nonfarm population, because this group lives in rural areas and by occupation is classified as nearer rural than urban. Together, these two groups represent 43.8 percent of the total population, and because they are full-time or part-time farmers, workers in agricultural or semi-agricultural industries, or live in village or open-country areas, they participate in what we think of as the "rural way of life".

Agriculture is one of the big economic enterprises of the Nation. Its primary function in the economic system is to supply the raw food and textile commodities for all society. Many of these commodities, such as eggs, milk, vegetables, and fruit flow directly from the farm into consumers' markets with no, or with very little, processing intervening. A tremendous volume of farm products flows through the channels of trade, transportation, and manufacturing, and thus buttresses economic enterprises other than farming. In 1929, over 30 percent of all the value of capital and 27 percent of all the wages paid by manufacturing were in industries using chiefly agricultural raw materials. 33.1 percent of all manufacturing wage earners were employed by these industries. During that same year, 12.6 percent of all the tonnage and 22.7 percent of all the revenue of Class I railroads in the Nation derived from agricultural products. <sup>1/</sup> Agricultural produce constitutes from 25 to 30 percent of our total export trade.

The enterprise of agriculture is, however, of much greater and more fundamental importance to the national economy than the figures just given indicate, for it is basic not only to other economic enterprises in terms of volume of business and revenue, but to the very life of the Nation in terms of the fundamental consumers' goods without which our 130 million people would actually starve. It is the sort of an enterprise which performs the fundamental function of feeding and clothing the Nation in times of depression as well as in times of prosperity. As a matter of fact, its services and contributions to society become relatively more important during depressions than they are during normal periods or periods of prosperity, because agriculture continues to operate on a pretty constant level of production while other enterprises are curtailing their activities. Not only does it continue to feed and clothe the Nation whether times are good or bad, but it helps to keep other industries going by sending its products to market either directly or through the processor. For ex-

---

<sup>1/</sup> Louis H. Bean and Arthur P. Chew, Economic Trends Affecting Agriculture. U. S. Dept. Agr. (Unnumbered Pub.) 1933, pp. 11 and 14.

...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...

...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...

...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...

...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...  
...the ... of the ...



ample, in terms of the total tonnage of freight handled by Class I railways, and the revenue derived therefrom; the percentage representing all agricultural products actually was greater in 1932 than it was in 1929. In addition, a much larger volume of farm products was transported by trucks during 1932 than in 1929. 2/ Agriculture did not sabotage industry or the consumer market during the recent depression but kept its goods flowing into the channels of trade, transportation, commerce, and finance even when prices were low. In 1939, the farmers provided food to the people of this Nation for at least 2 billion dollars less than they would have received if the retail prices for farm products had been in line with other prices.

Agriculture is contributing annually about six and three-quarter billion dollars to the total national income, and in addition, consumes on the farm from a billion and a half to two billion dollars worth of its own products; it buys from non-farmers approximately 8 billion dollars worth of goods and services annually.

These economic facts have particular significance to us from a welfare point of view in terms of the people who participate in the benefits of such an enterprise. I said above that agriculture, in its contribution of materials essential to sustaining the life of the Nation, held up during the depression, furnishing food and fiber for our people and raw materials for industry. But while it was doing this public or social service, farm income and agriculture's share of the national income were decreasing on the one hand, and the number of people on farms was increasing on the other hand. In 1930, for example, when 24.8 percent of the national population was on farms; agriculture's share of the national income was 8.7 percent. But in 1932, in the depths of the depression, when 24.9 percent of the Nation's population was on farms, agriculture's share of the national income was only 5.8 percent. The ratio between farm population and farm income is more favorable now than it was in 1932, but agriculture still has a far greater share of the Nation's population than it has of the national income.

To get an adequate picture of the place of rural life in the Nation's welfare, it is necessary to look at the social factors as well as the economic. If the future population of the cities continues to be drawn largely from rural areas, the kind of social organizations, services, and institutions available in rural areas and the efficiency of their functioning will continue to be of especial importance. Some of the values which inhere in rural life are social, psychological, and philosophical, and therefore not measurable, but this does not mean that they are any less important than those which can be stated in precise terms.

The machinery to operate public welfare and educational programs has always been more effective in urban than in rural areas for two reasons: first, country people have been expected to take care of their

---

2/ Louis H. Bean and Arthur P. Chew, Economic Trends Affecting Agriculture. U.S. Dept. Agr. (Unnumbered Pub.) 1933, p. 14.





own poor and manage with what educational facilities they could support; and second, rural poverty and rural social institutions have not been so concentrated as to attract widespread public attention. By and large, the people of the United States have not been aware of the load which agriculture carries and the contribution it makes to our total culture.

On the bright side of the canvas, rural life has certain advantages over urban life which have prevailed in rural cultures in many parts of the world and for a long period of time. Studies show that while male farmers constitute 18.6 percent of the occupational population, they constitute only 3.3 percent of all criminals. Rural crime rates are lower<sup>than</sup> urban and lower than for other occupations. 3/ Similarly, suicide rates are lower in rural than in urban areas nearly everywhere in the world and are lower in agriculture than in other occupations. Urban population has a conspicuously higher rate of divorce than the rural population, and the rate tends to increase with the increase of the size of cities. The same relationships apply to desertion and separation in the rural and urban population and in agriculture as compared with other occupations. 4/ What these facts mean is that the greater stability of family life in rural than in urban areas constitutes one of the greatest values which inhere in the rural way of life.

Poverty and unemployment figures as indices of well-being or the lack of it are more difficult to use accurately in making rural-urban comparisons. While poverty in the agricultural population is serious and widespread, it is mitigated to some extent, and especially in certain non-commercial areas, by a degree of economic self-sufficiency not possible in the city. Unemployment on the farm, on the other hand, exists more often in terms of under-employment or ineffective employment than total unemployment. The recent Unemployment Census shows that while the nonfarm population had a greater percentage of its population totally employed than did the farm population, it also had a greater percentage totally unemployed. The nonfarm population also contained a greater percentage of "partly unemployed" and "emergency workers" than did the farm population. 5/

Probably the greatest value of the rural mode of living, which is not subject to precise measurement, is its actual and potential capacity for self-sufficiency which is not only economic but social and psychological as well. Stable family life; enduring social relationships of friends and neighbors of long standing; intimate contact with the soil, plants, and animals; absence of complex economic and social machinery which produces nervous tensions and tends to break down primary group relationships; all these are values to be found in the country to a far greater extent than in the city.

---

3/ Zimmerman, Sorokin, and Galpin, Source Book, Part II, pp. 279 and 283.

4/ Ibid. pp. 6 and 9.

5/ Census of Unemployment: 1937, Final Report, Vol. IV, The Enumerative Check Census, Table 18, pp. 49 and 50, Washington, D. C., 1938.





On the darker side of the picture we must list as of primary importance the lag in standard institutional facilities, which means inequality of opportunity for those who live in rural areas. If the schools and churches, and the programs for health, recreation and welfare are ineffective and inadequate, as they are in many rural areas in the United States, then farm people are relatively disadvantaged when compared with city people. While only 25 percent of the national population lives on farms, approximately 50 percent of all the families of the nation with annual incomes of less than \$750 are in agriculture.

The Advisory Committee on Education, in a recent report to the President of the United States states that: "In 1935-36 almost equal numbers of children were attending city schools and rural schools. City school systems spent an average of \$108 that year for each child in attendance; rural schools spent an average of \$67.00. Since town and village schools are counted as rural for statistical purposes, average expenditures per child in schools of open-country areas were undoubtedly much lower than \$67.00.

"Low school expenditures in rural areas have unfortunate results for the children. Since the teachers are poorly paid, they are frequently untrained and inexperienced. They usually follow textbooks and make little use of supplementary materials to give vitality and interest to their teaching. School terms average a month shorter than in cities. The health, welfare, guidance, and other services that school children need in addition to instruction are almost universally lacking."6/ "Nearly 2,000 rural schools in 24 States failed to open in the fall of 1933 because of lack of funds, depriving 100,000 children of educational opportunity."7/ It was estimated by the Advisory Committee on Education that the total population in rural areas lacking in public-library service, other than that provided by school libraries, is 39½ million, while in urban areas it is only 5½ million. 8/

The health record of rural areas also suffers by comparison with urban centers, due to a maldistribution of doctors, hospitals, clinics, and public-health nurses. Serious and communicable diseases are not sufficiently controlled in rural areas and preventive medicine is practically unknown. According to a report of the Committee on Medical Care, typhoid fever is largely a rural disease; malaria is most prevalent in the open country; pellagra is still associated almost entirely with rural dietary deficiencies; and the rate of preventable deaths, especially in maternity cases and among infants under one year of age, is still disproportionately high among farm families. 9/ It has been only

---

6/ Advisory Committee on Education, The Federal Government and Education, p. 2.

7/ Woofter and Winston, Seven Lean Years, p. 59.

8/ Advisory Committee on Education, Report of the Committee, Washington, D.C., Feb. 1938, p. 138.

9/ National Health Conference Report of the Committee on Medical Care, Washington, 1938, p. 19.





within the past 4 or 5 years that agencies designed especially for assistance in rural areas have played an important role. The rural rehabilitation program of the Farm Security Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps and National Youth Administration programs are steps in this direction; the Social Security and Public Health Service programs make contributions.

It is well known that open-country areas have practically no recreation facilities of their own. The National Recreation Association has found that most municipalities under 8,000 population cannot provide the desirable necessary recreation areas and maintain a year-round recreation administrative organization. Among communities under 2,500, the majority do not even have parks. <sup>10/</sup> This lack of recreational facilities means that farmers and their families must either travel to cities for them or do without, and everyone will agree that with the increasing amount of leisure time available to people in modern life, recreation becomes of greater importance than ever before, for rural as well as urban people.

The day is past when each local rural community is expected to stand solely upon its own feet. We not only are attempting to equalize educational opportunities as between the richer and poorer local communities, but also as between all communities in given States, and we shall soon be doing the same thing on a national basis. We are rapidly coming to a conviction that children nowhere in our Nation should be denied the fundamentals of health and education, and shall probably fairly soon insist upon expanding public services to the fields of recreation, library services, and art galleries. It is high time that we come to an understanding that millions of children cannot be reared under unfavorable circumstances in rural areas without influencing urban areas, for hundreds of thousands of them born and reared in the country live out their lives and exercise their influence in urban centers. Rural welfare, as well as city welfare, must therefore be a concern of our whole population.

In attempting to promote rural welfare, however, the sole method is not merely to adopt urban techniques. Rural housing, for instance, need not and should not altogether follow city patterns. Rural recreation need not and probably should not become so commercialized as city recreation, and even so-called rural welfare need not always be carried on by the elaborate social-work techniques used in cities. There are yet in the "country way of life" great potentialities of economic, social, and psychological self-sufficiency. Self-help is no new doctrine in rural areas, and the best approach to the improvement of rural life on all fronts is to utilize the capacities for self-sufficiency and to expand self-help from an individual to a community and cooperative basis. To do otherwise is so completely to urbanize farming and farm life as to lose nationally the unique contributions which country life always has made and always should make to our civilization.

---

<sup>10/</sup> Recreational Use of Land in the United States, Part XI of Report on Land Planning, National Resources Committee, 1938, p. 102.





There is, of course, a great fallacy and lack of understanding in the assumption that rural life can or should so completely isolate itself from urban influences as to stand completely on its own feet. There is the constant interchange of populations and the market relationships mentioned above. Most of the market demand for farm products originates in cities, and farmers in turn buy annually billions of dollars' worth of products from cities. Over a period of the last 20 years, there has been an annual average of 1,641,000 farm people who have moved to towns and cities and an annual average of 567,200 town and city people who have moved to farms. With the interchange of goods, and especially with the interchange of people, there is a constant interchange of urban and rural culture, and it is possible that rural areas are contributing very much more to urban culture than we have been in the habit of imagining.

In the first place, there are many more people born and reared in the country who go to the city than there are who move in the opposite direction. In the second place, it is highly probable that rural attitudes carried to the city run much deeper and are less modifiable than urban attitudes brought to the country. Rural attitudes and mores are of much longer standing, are built up during the first 15 or 20 years of life, and are thereby supposed to be more highly conditioning in their influence than any other attitudes. Furthermore, the relatively short period of time it has taken to develop the urban part of our society would suggest that the general nature of the population of our cities in outlook and attitude is not so very far removed from the pioneering days of the Nation itself, and these pioneering days were certainly shot through and through with rural ideologies, attitudes, and impulses. Let me therefore repeat that it is highly probable that rural culture is today influencing city culture far more profoundly than is generally known or appreciated.

Nor can we overlook the rather widespread belief that every nation's well-being depends to a considerable extent upon the maintenance of a fairly high percentage of its citizens on the farm and upon an abiding knowledge and appreciation of the fundamental importance of agriculture and rural life to national stability and perpetuity. This viewpoint may rest to some extent merely upon traditional ways of thinking and may be due to the fact that the accepted values of one generation become the prejudices of succeeding generations. If this be true, then our predilections in behalf of rural ideologies and attitudes may be due to a lag in attitudes behind the actual adjustments to a society which has been rapidly changing in the direction of urban patterns. I am inclined to believe, however, that there are two other facts which contribute to this belief that it is well to maintain and nurture the rural ways of life. One is a knowledge that urban areas must constantly recruit their people from rural areas. No nation is complacent about a declining population. It is therefore interested in the seed beds and nurseries of its own national vitality, and these seed beds and nurseries are in the rural areas, measured in the undeniable facts of high birth rates. But beyond this population phenomenon lies the conviction that in the simple, relatively independent ways of life, which are still possible on the farm, there inhere values which suffer depletion under the hurly-burly activities and relationships of modern city life.





The American farmer, with all his faults, has been a peculiarly valuable citizen because of the characteristics he has developed out of his past way of doing things. He has been fundamentally a producer, not a money maker; fundamentally a creator, not a mere laborer; a keeper of the earth, not a juggler of markets and prices; a worker, not a speculator; an observer, not a calculator; fundamentally a democrat, not the rank individualist of which he has been accused, and certainly not a communist or fascist; a lover of life rather than a lover of things. Some of these characteristics and attitudes may be handicaps to him, but they are what three hundred years of pioneer life and nation-building have made him and it is from them that we must develop our rural life of tomorrow.

Men do have a degree of self-sufficiency in the country which it is difficult to maintain in the city. This self-sufficiency may be retained at the expense of considerable sacrifice in the material standard of living and with a relatively small amount of purchased goods, but it is retained and maintained because farm families by the millions prefer a degree of old-fashioned independence even though it must be purchased with these sacrifices. They measure themselves and their neighbors in terms of their capacities to remain relatively self-sufficient rather than in terms of conspicuous consumption or other monetary symbols of status.

It is because the individual and the family are recognized as units in society that divorce, crime, and suicide rates are low in country districts. In other words, these believers in the fundamental goodness of rural ways of life seriously question the possibility of building and maintaining a society for any great period of time on a purely rationalized, expertized, and compulsorily collectivized scheme of life. They have more faith in the folkways and mores than they do in the rationalized ways of life, and while these attitudes automatically make them conservative, sometimes even reactionary, to so-called programs of progress, they at the same time guarantee that the present and the future will not break so rapidly with the past as to create chaos and confusion. All of these attitudes may not be good, but they are a part of the contribution of rural life to the Nation and to national welfare.

The rapidity with which our cities have been built, the universal trends in urbanization, and the fact that inventions, creations, and general social change take place in greater magnitude and with greater acceleration in the city than in the country may be leading us not only to false notions about the superiority of the city, but to a failure to recognize the importance of rural life and agriculture to the Nation's well-being. The fact that customs and traditions change more slowly in rural areas, that rural institutions are generally more conservative, that rural people are thought to be old-fashioned, that new social services and adaptations are slow in penetrating rural areas may be leading us to false theories concerning the measure of progress we are making in national well-being.

There is furthermore a high probability that a great nation





seeking to develop a unity by democratic methods, which is attained in totalitarian States by other means, may find some of the chief foundations of a democracy in the simple, relatively independent, and relatively self-sufficient mode of life which is found much more often on the farm than elsewhere.

Although it may sound a little oratorical, I can do no better in concluding this paper than to quote two paragraphs from a recent article "The 32,000,000 Farmers," in Fortune Magazine for February, 1940:

"No nation, whether agricultural, mercantile, or industrial, has yet emancipated itself from the soil. Humanity belongs to the land and has not evolved -- and may never evolve -- to the point where it can live abundantly and virtuously in stone and macadam, clustered around elevator shafts, in the midst of a synthetic flora and fauna created by the captains of industry. Humanity cannot leave the land, and for this reason the men of the soil limit the level to which a civilization may rise."

"The American farmer proudly claims his rights as equal citizen in a free society; he can point out with equal pride that he never lost his roots in the soil. Servant of the soil -- free member of a money economy; in this antithesis, pregnant with conflicts and victories, lie the achievements, the problems, and the promise of the American farmer."

